

## the best of all the years have gone by by jellyfishes

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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**Characters:** Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Ted Wheeler

**Relationships:** Joyce Byers/Karen Wheeler

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**Summary:**

Karen gets drunk and shows up at Joyce's door. They have some things to talk about.

## the best of all the years have gone by

### Author's Note:

I don't know how this happened. Enjoy?  
(Title from Total Eclipse of the Heart, which is 100%  
a Joyren song)

The last time Karen saw Joyce in person—just the two of them—was when Will went missing. She spent the entire day debating whether or not her presence would make Joyce feel better or worse, and ultimately decided that a casserole was the least she could do to help out. And it had been going well, Karen thinks, until Holly wandered off and Joyce asked them to leave rather abruptly. She doesn't blame Joyce—God knows that if Michael went missing, Karen wouldn't be stable enough to chat with an old friend over a casserole.

It's sort of ironic, that Mike and Will became the best of friends after Karen and Joyce fell apart. They could never have a clean split because of it, not when Will's face alone is a reminder to Karen that they both settled for something they didn't want. *Someone* they didn't want.

Karen doesn't think about it anymore. She has Ted, and her kids, and a big house, and a good job, and there's nothing she could conceivably complain about in her life.

Only—when she's drunk, the thoughts spill into the forefront of her brain, impossible to ignore. She remembers the taste of the chapstick Joyce always wore, the softness of her hair between her fingers, the feeling of her lips sliding across her neck, leaving behind sticky memories.

It was so good for so long, just them against the world. They were going to buy a house together in California, get away from Hawkins where nothing ever happens. They would leave their parents behind and start a new life, one free of judgement and hate.

What a load of *shit* .

They lasted a month in California. They rented a small room (more of a closet, really, and the irony isn't lost on Karen) from a nice homosexual couple in San Francisco, and neither of them could find jobs, and things started to crack between them too quickly. What was once passion and love fizzled into contempt and *loneliness* , deep, aching loneliness. They slept in the same bed, but they may as well have been miles apart.

Karen moved back to Hawkins.

Her parents said "I told you so" and Karen knew that she wasn't in any position to argue, so she clenched her jaw and stayed silent.

Sometimes she wonders what would have happened if she stayed with Joyce. Maybe, with a little more time, they would have grown back together, like a mended stitch. Maybe they would have found jobs if she stuck around a bit longer. Maybe, maybe, *maybe* .

Karen gets drunk.

Mike and all his friends are in the basement, Nancy is studying in her room, Holly is down for the night, and there's no reason for Karen not to get drunk.

And when the memories start to pile on top of each other, screaming in her head, she unsteadily makes her way downstairs. Ted is snoring loudly in his recliner. Karen wobbles as she throws on some shoes, her hands shaking as she unlocks the front door.

She must be walking for hours. The flats she'd stuffed on are ruined and her feet are hurting like she's just run a marathon. She's not even drunk anymore, she's just angry.

She ends up at Joyce's house.

All the lights are off except the one in the living room. The last time Karen was here, the whole house was lit up like a Christmas tree. It's dark and dingy once again, the polar opposite of Karen's house.

Karen is raising her hand to knock on the door before she can begin to stop herself. She must look insane, out in the cold with just jeans and a t-shirt, her hair a mess, all her makeup taken off. She can't

bring herself to care.

“Karen?” Joyce says when the door opens. She’s in her pajamas, her hair done up with a scrunchie. “Is Will okay?”

“He’s fine,” Karen slurs. She might still be a *little bit* drunk, then. “I need—To talk to you.”

Joyce opens her mouth and then closes it again. “Okay.”

Karen pushes past Joyce just to feel their skin touch again. She settles on the couch, crossing her legs primly. Joyce cautiously sits next to her, avoiding her eyes.

“Ted has never given me an orgasm.”

“Oh my god,” Joyce says, shaking her head. “Karen, you—You’re drunk. You don’t really want me to hear this.”

“I do,” Karen insists. “Because—Because it’s your *fault* .”

Joyce snorts. “How is it my fault?”

“Because you ruined everything!” Karen shouts, her blood boiling. “I was—Perfectly fine with dating boys in high school, perfectly fine! And then you ruined it.”

Joyce raises her eyebrows, and puts a hand in front of her mouth. She’s trying not to laugh. “I don’t think that’s my fault.”

“It is , you—you—” Karen gasps, and then she drops her head in her hands, letting out an ugly sob.

Joyce hesitates, and then Karen feels her hand resting on her shoulder. “Hey, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“I hate Ted,” Karen says. “I hate him. I want a divorce.”

“Oh,” Joyce says, her eyes wide. “Are you? Getting a divorce, I mean?”

“No,” Karen says miserably. “Holly is so little, and—I don’t have the

money for my own house. I'd be all on my own, and—"

She trails off, wiping under her eyes delicately, despite having no makeup on that she needs to protect.

"Wine," Joyce says, standing up. "We need wine."

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"Do you remember," Karen cuts herself off in a peal of laughter. "When Mr. Vaughn almost caught us in the supply closet?"

"God," Joyce groans, laying her head back on the couch. "It was so small in there, I couldn't even move! I had to just—kneel on the floor and pray he wouldn't see us."

Karen feels lighter than she has in years, and it's not because of the wine. "Or—Or that time when Bill and Alec took us to that opera and we snuck out half way through to make out in the car?"

Joyce throws her arm over her eyes and says, "How did we get away with that? They never even noticed we left!"

"They really liked the opera," Karen laughs.

Joyce's smile dims. "I wonder how they're doing," she says. "They were sort of old, back then. What, like, sixty?"

Karen nods, trying to do the math in her drunk state. "They'd have to be gone by now," she says. "They were good people. I wish—I wish I stayed in contact."

Joyce hums in agreement. "They wrote me a letter once," she says.

"What?" Karen turns to face her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, because we tell each other everything, don't we?" Joyce bites back, and then sighs. "It was when Will was a baby. Bill and Alec were still kickin', though. Still together, too."

Karen sinks into the couch, letting out a breath of air. "Do you ever think that could have been us?"

“No way,” Joyce says immediately, a hint of laughter in her voice. “We were never meant for San Francisco.”

“No, I meant—I mean—” Karen shakes her head. “Nevermind.”

She pours herself another glass, shaking the now empty bottle. Neither of them want to get up and grab another one.

Karen, feeling emboldened by the alcohol and the proximity of Joyce’s body to hers, says, “I still love you, you know.”

Joyce’s eyes are too deep and emotive for Karen to look at, so she doesn’t. She looks at Joyce’s lips instead.

“Karen,” Joyce says warily. “You’re married.”

Karen watches her lips form the words, mesmerized. It’s been a long time since she felt their lips touch, but she still remembers the taste. “One more time,” she says. She’ll regret it in the morning, they both will, but she needs to try it one last time. Then she’ll go back to Ted, and her kids, and her big house, and her good job. She won’t complain. “One more—”

She doesn’t get to finish before Joyce leans in and their lips collide. She doesn’t taste like chapstick anymore, she tastes like wine, and she doesn’t feel inexperienced and curious, she feels fierce and dominant. Karen brings her hands up to tangle in Joyce’s hair, pulling out the scrunchie and letting it fall to the floor.

They kiss until they’re breathing hard and their lips hurt and they’re both completely ruined for anyone else. They know they can’t go further, or else they’ll never stop.

“I need to leave,” Karen says, looking at the floor so she doesn’t have to see Joyce’s face.

“Yeah,” Joyce says, laughing shortly, angrily. “You do.”

“I’m sorry,” Karen says, while she puts her shoes back on. “I really—I love you, Joyce.”

Joyce doesn’t say it back, and Karen is glad, because she thinks she

might stay if she does.

“You know,” Karen starts, the blood rushing to her head when she stands up. “You pretend that this is all my fault. I’m the one who left you and gave up on us, but—You married Lonnie before I even *met* Ted. When you moved back to Hawkins, I waited—waited for you to show up, but you never did. And then I heard from my fucking *mother* that you’re getting married. So don’t—don’t pretend this is my fault.”

Karen doesn’t wait to hear Joyce’s response. She throws open the front door and storms out. She hopes that the memories of this night won’t follow her home, but knows that they will.

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Ted is still snoring on the recliner when Karen gets home. A surge of anger blooms in her chest, and she stares at him, clenching her fists. She wants to wake him up, to swear at him, to shout that she wants a divorce.

She settles for thrusting her middle finger in his direction.

### **Author’s Note:**

Ted: “What’d I dooooo?”

Thanks for reading! You can also find me at my [stranger things blog](#), where I’m taking prompts!.

Have a great, safe Thanksgiving if you celebrate it, or else have a great, safe Thursday!